



**File Code:** 1950  
**Date:** May 27, 2016

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The Bessey Ranger District of the Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands is proposing to remove Eastern red cedar trees from the grasslands on National Forest System lands in Thomas and Blaine counties. The purpose of the project is to restore the functional value of the prairies and to maintain the open scenic plains. The enclosed attachment describes the project's details.

We request your comments on this project. To be most helpful, please send your comments by June 30, 2016. Please email your comments to [tteahon@fs.fed.us](mailto:tteahon@fs.fed.us) with "Bessey Woody Encroachment" in the subject line. Acceptable electronic formats are .pdf, .txt, .doc, .rtf, or other formats readable with Microsoft Word.

If using the postal service, mail your comments to:

Tedd Teahon, District Fire Management Officer  
Bessey Ranger District  
PO Box 39  
Halsey NE 69142

You can also hand-deliver your comments to 40637 River Loop Drive in Halsey from 8:30 am to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday, excluding Federal holidays. To submit oral comments, please call Tedd Teahon at (308) 533-8108 to arrange an appointment. Tedd can also answer any technical questions you have about the project.

Project documents are available for review at the Bessey Ranger District, or on the forest's web site at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/nebraska/landmanagement/projects>.

I look forward to your comments on this project.

Sincerely,

JULIE BAIN  
District Ranger

**Enclosure**



# Nebraska National Forests and Grasslands

## Bessey Ranger District

### Bessey Woody Encroachment Project

#### Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to restore the functional value of the prairie and to maintain the open scenic plains in the Bessey Ranger District.

#### Location

This project is located on National Forest System lands between the Middle Loup and Dismal Rivers in Thomas and Blaine counties (Figure 1). The proposed location would not include any areas previously analyzed in the Bessey 2 Fuels Reduction Project.

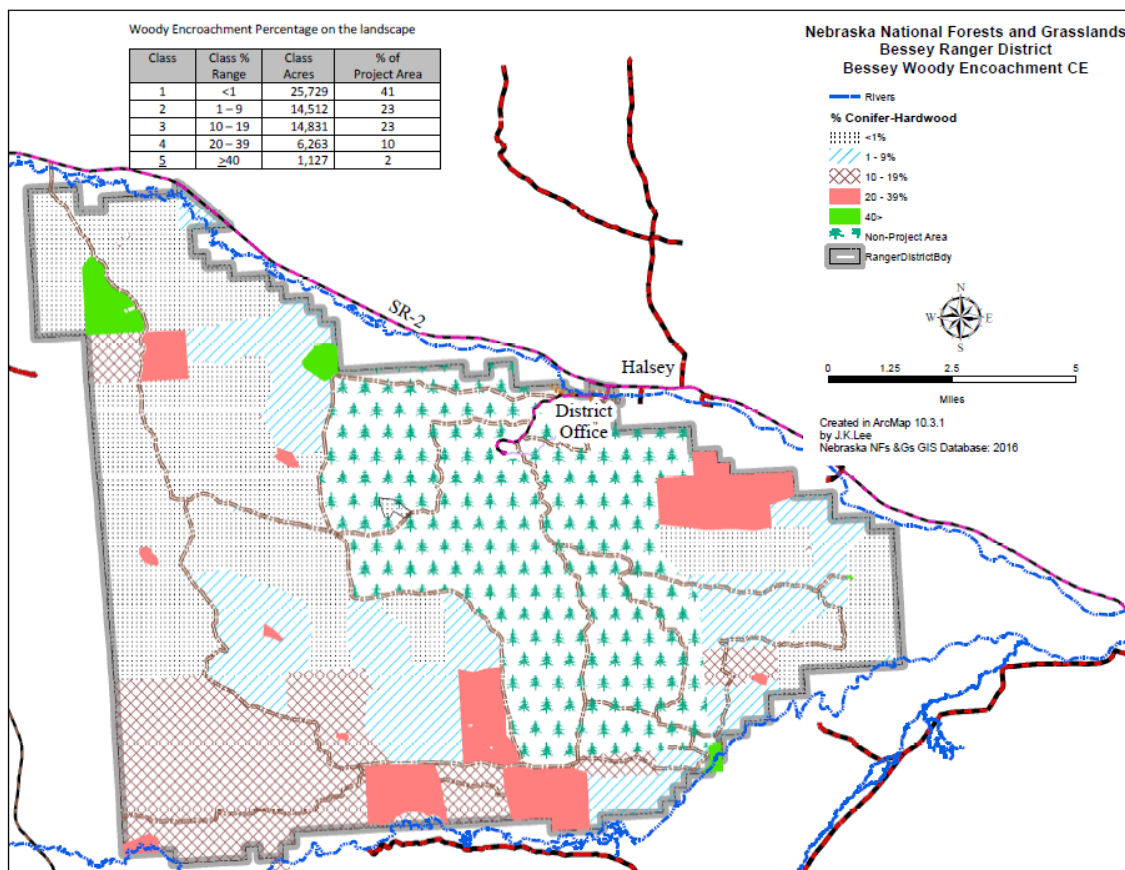


Figure 1: Map of project area.

## Existing Condition

Eastern red cedar trees, which are one of the species that were hand-planted here, are encroaching into the native grasslands. Once established (taller than the grass around them), they are resistant to fire. A forest of Eastern red cedar trees is ecologically distinct from a grassland, eventually displacing native grassland plant and animal species.



Figure 2. Eastern red cedar trees growing in the grasslands. March 2016.



Figure 3: Young Eastern red cedar trees moving from the planted area (background) into native grasslands (foreground). January 2016.

## Desired Condition

The following desired conditions are taken from the 2009 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Nebraska National Forest and Associated Units:

- The Prairie Landscape desired condition is to maintain the open and scenic plains and vast prairie landscapes. Recreationists should perceive that they are visiting an expansive native prairie. Red cedar numbers will be reduced in open pine stands and where they are spreading into native grasslands (p. 2-5).
- Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired non-native species and to achieve objectives for Management Indicator Species (Goal 1b, p. 1-3).
- Increase the amount of forests and grasslands restored to or maintained in a healthy condition with reduced risk and damage from fires, insects and diseases, and invasive species (Goal 1c, p. 1-3).
- Within 10 years, implement management practices, including prescribed fire that will move all affected landscapes toward desired vegetation composition and structure as described in Geographic Area direction (Objective 1 for Goal 1c, p. 1-3).

## Proposed Action

Forest staff would remove Eastern red cedar trees using chainsaws and/or mechanical equipment. The downed trees will be treated in one or more of the following manners: skidded, piled or decked, chipped, masticated, and burned when conditions warrant. Prescribed burning will be used when conditions warrant for maintenance to reduce new seedlings that may encroach. The cut Eastern red cedar trees may be available for sale to the public depending on the location of the piles and the timing of them being burned.

1. All equipment for listed activities will not be staged inside of blowouts occupied by blowout penstemon.
2. Chips will be removed from the site.
3. Masticated chunks will not be removed from the site.
4. Trees will be decked or piled at least 100 feet away from noxious weeds.
5. During prescribed burns, range infrastructure such as fences, windmills, or other sensitive things will be protected in one of the following ways: having a water truck follow the fire, or by mowing and burning out the area first.
6. Existing roads and trails will be used for fire control lines where possible.
7. New firelines, such as with a dozer blade, are expected to be less than two chains and will be seeded with rye after the prescribed burn. About 95 percent of fire control lines will be mowed.
8. Equipment for listed activities will not cause ground disturbance in excess of 8 inches deep.
9. Fire control lines will be built with rolling grades and minimum downhill convergence and so that water drains off of them and away from the burn.



10. Trees will be felled away from the spring/wetland where possible and safe to do so. If a tree must be felled such that it falls in a wetland, it will be bucked and removed by lifting, not dragging, it.
11. Chainsaw fuel and lubricants will be stored at least 100 feet away from water and wetlands.
12. In planted areas, retain downed logs pursuant to forest plan direction.
13. Rocky Mountain Juniper may be burned through, but should be checked after the fire has passed.

This project may start as early as July 2016. Mechanical work in optimal American Burying Beetle (ABB) habitat will be conducted outside of the ABB active season. The ABB active season is defined as: after a period during spring with five consecutive nights with low temperatures above 55 degrees Fahrenheit (approximately May 1) until the first killing frost in fall (approximately October 1). Mechanical work outside of optimal ABB habitat will be year round. Pile burning in all habitats will be conducted outside of the ABB active season and begin when conditions are adequate, at least one year after trees have been piled. Prescribed burning in all habitats will be conducted outside of the ABB active season.

Once Eastern red cedars and other undesirable species have been removed, maintenance of the grasslands would continue indefinitely by removing encroaching cedars by cutting or prescribed burning. It is likely that a prescribed burn would occur every 5 to 15 years on average; however, it could be needed every year. Thinning could occur every year depending on the amount of encroachment and success of the prescribed burning.

### **Categorical Exclusion**

We anticipate this project will be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or an environmental impact statement under category at 36 CFR 220.6(e)6:

Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- (i)** Girdling trees to create snags;
- (ii)** Thinning or brush control to improve growth or to reduce fire hazard including the opening of an existing road to a dense timber stand;
- (iii)** Prescribed burning to control understory hardwoods in stands of southern pine; and
- (iv)** Prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor.

This category is appropriate because the proposed action includes thinning and prescribed burning, which are both examples listed with this category. Preliminary analysis indicates that there are no significant effects to extraordinary circumstances.

This proposal is consistent with the 2009 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Nebraska National Forest and Associated Units.